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Trump administration tears down regulations to speed drilling on public land



Pump jacks are seen at dawn in an oil field over the Monterey Shale formation in California, where hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is being used for gas and oil extraction. (David McNew/Getty Images)

The Trump administration is aggressively sweeping aside regulations protecting public land to clear a path for expanded oil and gas drilling.

A [memorandum](#) from the Interior Department, made public Thursday, directs its field offices “to simplify and streamline the leasing process” so that federal leases to the oil and gas industry can be expedited “to ensure quarterly oil and gas lease sales are consistently held.”

According to the memo, which was dated Wednesday, doing so will ease such “impediments and burdens” as months-long environmental reviews that assess the impacts of drilling and potential spills on land and wildlife.

The new approach requires the Bureau of Land Management to process a proposed lease within 60 days. Once-mandatory public participation in safety reviews is now left to the discretion of the agency’s field representatives. Public protests of finalized leases will be shortened to 10 days,

and a sale can move forward even if disputes are unresolved, according to the memo.

Interior also ended “Master Lease Plans” implemented under the Obama administration to give hunters, anglers and groups hoping to protect cultural artifacts a voice in how public land should be managed when parcels are proposed for leasing.

The moves are consistent with an [executive order](#) President Trump issued in his first days in office to fulfill his campaign goal of “expediting environmental reviews and approvals” to fast-track efforts to fix the country’s roadways and bridges. Trump’s order was later followed by a similar order from Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.



Part of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is being opened Friday to mining claims. (Douglas C. Pizac/AP)

The bureau’s changes were announced just one day before Interior is scheduled to allow new leasing and mining on millions of protected acres in national monuments. On Friday morning, companies and individuals can stake mining claims in two Utah monuments Trump plans to reduce: Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears.

The bureau boasted [in a statement](#) Thursday that its state offices generated \$360 million from sales of oil and gas leases last year, an 86 percent increase from 2016. Rights to parcels covering nearly 793,000 acres of public land were sold. BLM Deputy Director Brian Steed said the revenue increase is “hard proof that our sound energy policy is working for both public lands and Americans in terms of reliable power and job growth opportunities.”

Conservation groups see the issue differently. The Wilderness Society pointed out that oil and gas companies owned leases on 15 million acres before 2017, with thousands of drilling permits they haven’t used.

“Today’s announced sweeping change to BLM’s oil and gas leasing program threatens irreplaceable federal public lands and resources in Utah and across the West,” said Stephen Bloch, legal director for the Southern Wilderness Alliance. He called it a “lease first, think later” policy that is “fundamentally inconsistent with federal laws that demand agencies think before they act and consider the full range of impacts from selling oil and gas leases.”



Deb Thomas of Clark, Wyo., speaks at a 2013 “Stop the Frack Attack People’s Forum” in Washington, D.C., to discuss how people living near oil and gas fields are affected by fracking. (Gary Cameron/Reuters)

Michael Saul, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said that it is “deeply disturbing that the Trump administration wants to give fossil fuel companies free rein over our public lands, without community input or disclosing environmental harms.” The changes announced won’t speed up oil and gas leasing, Saul predicted. “They’ll result in rushed, ill-considered, illegal decisions that will be overturned in court.”

In pushing to expand drilling on public land, Trump is following a well-worn path of Republican administrations.

A month before he left office, George W. Bush revived plans to [sell oil and gas leases](#) in wilderness areas in eastern Utah that had long been protected from development. Sites included pristine areas in the Nine Mile Canyon region and parts of Desolation Canyon, White River, Diamond Mountain and Bourdette Draw. Interior’s own Board of Land Appeals at the time had issued an administrative ruling backing the leasing prohibition.

And as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) was running for president in 2008, he and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, were among GOP politicians calling for domestic energy exploration with the chant, “Drill, baby, drill.”

“In a McCain administration, we will authorize and support new exploration and production of America’s own oil and gas reserves, because we cannot outsource the solution to America’s energy problem,” Palin said.

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